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Original Citation

Cooper, Martin (2009) Railway Museums in Brazil: State Politics and the Rise of the Volunteer Museum. *Journal of the International Association of Transport and Communications Museums*, 28 (1). pp. 51-56. ISSN 9783936240245

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Railway Museums in Brazil: State Politics and the Rise of the Volunteer Museum

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In 1977 Patrick Dollinger, a French-born engineer, helped to create the Associação Brasileira de Preservação Ferroviária (ABPF, Brazilian Railway Preservation Association) and shortly afterwards a group of volunteers began work on 24kms of track secured from the federal State railway company, the Rede Ferroviária Federal SA (RFFSA). The line, between Campinas and Jaguariúna in São Paulo state, began heritage rides in 1981. The ABPF, a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation, is also active in the states of Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Parana, Santa Catarina and Rio Grande do Sul. Some of its rail heritage sites today have the highest visitor figures of any attraction in the museum sector in Brazil.

The involvement of the State has not been as successful. In 1980 the RFFSA launched its *Programa de Preservação do Patrimônio Histórico Ferroviário* (PRESERFE, Heritage Railway Preservation Programme). It opened a network of railway museums across Brazil and planned to publish historical materials and to support research and restoration. But by 1999, after the privatisation of the industry, it lost virtually all its resources and now only acts as a point of reference for academic researchers. Four regional museums and archive centres in the cities of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Curitiba have closed.

The ownership of railways in Brazil

The history of the development of the railway in Brazil can be split into four broad phases. The first was between the 1850s and the 1920s during which railway construction experienced consistent growth. In this period individual companies were granted concessions by the State machinery. These companies were typically foreign owned, although at least one, the *Companhia Paulista*, was owned by Brazilian investors and there is evidence that the State played an interventionist role in certain areas such as attracting capital and eventually supporting loss-making operations.¹

Compared to England railways arrived relatively late in Brazil. In the twenty-five years since the opening of the Stockton and Darlington railway in 1825, Britain had 10,655

kilometres of lines built and operating. Michael Robbins calls these years up to 1850 the 'heroic period' of growth in Britain.² In 1854, as expansion in the UK was temporarily faltering, a Manchester-built Fairbairn 2-2-2 locomotive named 'Baroneza' pulled an Imperial coach on the inaugural run along a 14.5km stretch of 1.676 gauge line which eventually would link the Court at Petrópolis with the beaches and docks of Rio de Janeiro, a final distance of 16.2km.

The Emperor of Brazil, Dom Pedro II, after this first journey had a vision of Brazil connected by railways, which would aid the modernisation of land transport and open up the country for rapid economic development and faster access to world markets. Having gained independence peacefully from Portugal in 1822, Brazil was looking to Europe for ideas of modernity and growth to take it from its agrarian based colonial economy.³ At court the social manners of French culture were in vogue. Buildings and streets in Rio de Janeiro of the time were heavily influenced by the Parisian boulevard style of architecture. Meanwhile at the dawn of Brazil's railway age, the influence was entirely British, with North American engineering skills arriving toward the end of the century when they eventually came to dominate. The School of Engineering, part of the Military School at that time, began training its own limited number of railway engineers from 1858 onwards. But even so, effective control of Brazil's rail expansion remained pre-

dominantly in the hands of foreign capital and expertise for the next sixty years.⁴

The second phase came between 1920 and 1957 when the Brazilian Government bought out or commandeered the foreign owned rail lines and turned them into individual companies each reliant on state investment, in effect turning each into a state-owned operation. At its height in 1955, mostly clustered along the Atlantic coast and centred mainly in the highly populated commercial and political axes of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Curitiba and Belo Horizonte, Brazil had just over 37,000 kilometres of railway.⁵ In comparative terms the Brazilian network was miniscule: In Britain in 1962, just before large-scale branch line closures, there were 29,000 route kilometres in a country with a geographical area thirty-five times smaller than Brazil. In 1957 the Federal Government amalgamated the twenty companies and formed the RFFSA, representing the third phase of the railway in Brazil.⁶ In the late 1990s the final phase was reached, with the dismantling and privatisation of the network, which now had just over 28,000 route kilometres, used mostly for container freight and mining products.⁷

This paper will take one railway route as its case study, the line from Santos on the Atlantic coast through São Paulo and onwards to Jundiaí in the heart of the coffee-producing region of the state of São Paulo. The *San Paulo Railway* (SPR) was officially opened in 1867 and was owned and managed by a British company for the full term of its concession until 1946. It spent the second half of the 20th century as part of the Brazilian national rail network before being privatised in the late 1990s. This railway line has been a contested site of railway imperialism, evidenced by the fact that it has been known officially and unofficially by various names including the *San Paulo Railway*, *São Paulo Railway*, the *Inglesa*, and the *Estrada de Ferro Santos a Jundiaí*. Each name for this railway has denoted a particular gaze upon the landscape and its transport system. This paper takes its conceptual standpoint from Wolfgang Schivelbusch's notion of the 'railway ensemble', which recognizes that the railway is both a product of a society and a producer of societal encounters.⁸ It is thus a signifier and a signified. The railway is the tracks, locomotives, the buildings, the bridges and cuttings, the timetables, the companies, the passengers, the workers, the builders, the accidents, the landowners along the trackside and all in between that is touched by the railway: the travel, the writing, the painting, the preservation, the memories and the imagining.

'Official' organisation of rail heritage

To put it bluntly: the museums run by the RFFSA since the late 1970s have suffered from a lack of investment and a lack of visitors. In 1980 the RFFSA developed PRESERFE with

the aim of identifying railway material to preserve and restore. This national network of museums, typified by static displays and plinthed locomotives, was the responsibility of just one man at RFFSA headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, and most of the fourteen sites were eventually either abandoned or taken over by volunteers and slightly reluctant local authorities.

In 1999 the RFFSA was put into administration as the privatisation programme was completed. In 2005, as part of the winding up process, the legal responsibility for the written archives and all artefacts passed to the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN), the Federal government department responsible for heritage management. In June of that year it was reported that Rio de Janeiro's only dedicated railway museum, the Centro de Preservação da História Ferroviária do Rio de Janeiro, created in 1984 at Engenho de Dentro in a poor northern suburb, had closed.⁹ The reason given was that there were not enough security guards available to allow the building to be left open. The newspaper *O Globo* said 'The question is whether this organisation [IPHAN] has the money and staff to look after these [railway] buildings and artefacts.'¹⁰ My estimate, based on interviews with RFFSA staff, is that the museum had an average of just four hundred visitors per month – including students, school trips and public.¹¹ This apparent abandonment of care and responsibility adds weight to the assertion that railway history is not regarded by the State as 'heritage'. One of the other sites run by the RFFSA, the railway museum at the village of Paranapiacaba, discussed later in this paper, has had a similar experience. The difference there, however, has been that the local community has organised a project to create something of its own out of the railway heritage in that village: an example of the public deciding for itself what is 'railway heritage' by creating volunteer and community groups away from the State's institutional machinery and mechanisms.

'Unofficial' organisation of rail heritage

The voluntary sector has fared much better in terms of visitor figures. The reason, this paper suggests, is that these sites include live-steam experiences. They represent a new departure for museums in Brazil, since more often than not 'you often hear the use of the term "museum" synonymously with the past, with stagnation.'¹² The rail sites with live steam are anything if stagnant or detached from their publics. The volunteer-led ones are part of what Myrian Santos identifies as a new breed of 'local' museums that have emerged since the 1960s.¹³ In the rail heritage sector these voluntary groups started in 1977 at Campinas in São Paulo State when the ABPF was formed.¹⁴

The birthplace of Brazil's rail preservation movement,

Campinas, is an example of what the voluntary sector can achieve. Using track from the former *Companhia Mogyana de Estradas de Ferro*, the group has invented its own name, *Viação Férrea Campinas-Jaguariúna* and has built up an impressive locomotive and carriage collection. The heritage trip includes docent interpretations of the coffee plantations and the importance of the railway to the local economy. The fact this line was used in a major TV soap opera in 1998/9 adds to the feeling of glamour that has been produced by curators here. It is the locomotives that are the stars, applauded by passengers as they noisily arrive at the platform. My estimate is that this heritage steam attraction has between 35 and 40 thousand visitors per year.

Case Study – Paranapiacaba

When it was opened in 1867 this *San Paulo Railway* station next to the upper winding house was known as Alto da Serra. In 1907 the village changed its name to Paranapiacaba, which in the indigenous Tupi-Guarani language means ‘place where you can see the sea’. Brazilian historians remark how the village has an English style.¹⁵ This could either be the rows of wooden terraced housing built for the railway workers or the clock tower known locally as ‘Big Ben’. It has also been remarked that ‘the climate is reminis-

cent of London in winter, with the traditional fog...’¹⁶ The subtext of the discourse here underlies the dilemma the village is facing: if ‘Brazil’ is regarded in the Brazilian imaginary as combining the spiritual and emotional warmth of its people with the tropical climate then Paranapiacaba, in its ‘London’ guise, is definitely not ‘Brazilian’ but rather a cold-hearted place. The fact that the village has been denoted with an indigenous name and is clearly part of the topography of the Brazilian nation has led to a conflict which had seen the virtual abandonment by the national rail company, RFFSA, yet a strong sense of local pride within the residents of the community. They appear to be going against officialdom that is ignoring the local heritage and actually embracing their feelings of being different and special.

The village began to fall into decay when the rope-hauled winding system was closed down and replaced with a rack railway in 1974-6. In 2001 suburban trains ran only at weekends into Paranapiacaba, and the following year the direct rail passenger service stopped running. Now to get to the village passengers have to take the train from São Paulo to Rio Grande da Serra and then a bus by road for the next three stops on the line.

In 2002 the local council of Santo André acquired the old English part of the village, but not the railway land, which



ABPF Campinas

'continues to be abandoned'.¹⁷ The reason for this was that the railway property was still legally owned by the State railway company, RFFSA, in administration. The village has twice been on the World Monuments Watch list of 100 most endangered sites, in 2000 and 2002.¹⁸

Work has been done to promote the village, with signage and the development of a bed-and-breakfast scheme whereby residents can let out their spare rooms to tourists on a tax-break basis. The local authority continues to market the village as a place to come for nature trails and walks in the Atlantic mountains, with the railway remaining as an unmentioned backdrop. The effect is to create an imaginary of the 'absent', ghost-like, English railway workers. In 2001 I met Sra. Isobel Leite, a lady in her seventies, who told me that she was the Railway Museum guide.¹⁹ The museum is housed in the old rope-winding shed and was all but abandoned with no permanent staff on duty. Sra. Isobel said her father started work in 1930 on the winding gear and she was educated and brought up in the 'English' manner with strict schooling. She said her father and her husband were both train drivers. She then talked about recent events in Paranapiacaba, of trouble with criminal gangs: the PCC (Primeiro Comando do Capital) and drug dealers which, she said meant 'no one comes, everyone's scared. It's been like this for two years. We hardly have any visitors.' Then she turned to survey the railway buildings behind her and said, 'I don't know who'll look after this now. It's all but abandoned. The Prefeitura [local authority] pays nothing, neither does the RFFSA.' Such frustration at inaction by the authorities is common in Brazil, however the renewed activity by the volunteers of the ABPF in 2006, and the launching of live steam excursions at weekends has led to renewed tourist interest in the village.

The group of schoolchildren I met were full of enthusiasm after their visit and talk with Sra. Isobel on that cold foggy day, with the mountain mists swirling into the railway sheds and around the ironwork of the huge stationary steam winding engines. Their teacher said his trip with the pupils had been a success, 'I think it's fundamental to bring children here. They get direct contact with the objects and artefacts and it makes their memories stronger. It gives them a real impression of what was the process of technological evolution that we've been through in the past 150 years.'²⁰

The route of the *San Paulo Railway* continues to be heavily used for rail freight traffic. Currently a rack system, installed in the mid 1970s, is being used. In 2005, with a forecast for 10 million tonnes of freight including iron ore and soya for the year end, a tender had been put out to re-build and re-open the original rope line to haul the extra freight up the one-in-ten inclines, effectively doubling the line's current capacity.²¹

Reasons for conflicts and problems

The Brazilian government, under President Lula, has identified 'culture' as an important policy area, but so far railway museums have not felt the full benefit of this enlightened approach. The tendency has been to favour the larger state-run established museums of art and history in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. Volunteer groups are developing railway heritage instead.

The Brazilian Government is currently actively engaged in both creating a national museums policy and with encouraging theoretical debates about museology. This is to be welcomed. In 2003 Gilberto Gil (a leading singer-songwriter in the Tropicalia movement who was imprisoned and exiled by the military regime of the 1960s) was appointed Minister of Culture and launched his National Museums Policy in the same year. The aims included the creation of a national museum network, the development of staff training, and the refinancing of the museum sector.²² However, the problems are significant: the policy remains centred on the larger organisations – and even the Ministry of Culture recognises that the networking which has occurred in the past few years has mostly been concentrated around forty of the centrally funded or university-based museums located in the major population centres of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Salvador.²³ In the absence of audited statistics, a 2001 estimate concluded that there were between 1,100 and 1,300 museums in Brazil.²⁴ This suggests that an elite is still being maintained and that the smaller local museums away from the metropolitan centres remain out of the development loop.

Where do railway museums fit into this? The short answer is that they are waiting to be 'recognised' by the State cultural management apparatus.

There is a long historical precedent to the government's involvement in museum culture. The first public museum in Brazil was established in 1808 in Rio de Janeiro: the Museu Real changed its name to the Museu Nacional in 1822, the year of Brazil's independence.²⁵ The collection was created by and for the ruling elite, and set a seal on the concept of the museum in Brazil that has persisted until the present.

The use of museums as a tool of cultural management in Brazil began in earnest in the 1930s, and Daryle Williams says the institutions that have been created '...were exemplars of the sometimes paternalistic, typically authoritarian, and invariably nationalistic process of state and nation building that characterizes modern Brazilian political history.'²⁶ Williams observes that this tendency has continued into the 1990s and I find no evidence from the first few years of the 21st century to challenge this view. Myrian Santos argues that,

Brazil, like any other nation-state, also needed well-established symbols and collective memories. But these symbols were certainly the result of different historically produced practices, which makes the narratives of Brazilian museums different in many aspects from those of other nations. One of the key points to be taken into account here is the fact that museums were created in a hierarchical society, in which people hardly believed in the ethos of public service for everyone. In short, museums were not created and do not operate under the shared belief in the equality of access and rights.²⁷

In a further essay, Myrian Santos goes on to identify a series of factors that have given rise to the lack of public interest in museums. Firstly, economic poverty has led to museums missing out on public funds. Secondly, with a relatively high illiteracy rate, Brazilian museums remain outside the scope of a population that is not equipped with the intellectual tools to engage with displays. The third factor is, according to Santos, that 'a museum visit does not figure typically amongst Brazilian cultural habits.'²⁸

One example of a State intervention in museum planning is the creation in 2005 at the Estação da Luz in São Paulo of the *Museu da Língua Portuguesa*. The Estação da Luz was opened in 1901. A fire badly damaged the Victorian-style building in 1946, on the eve of the *San Paulo Railway's* handover to the Brazilian authorities at the end of the British concession. The building has undergone substantial restoration both with an exterior repaint and internally where the lowering of the track beds has allowed for the installation of new train electrification systems. Below ground a passenger interchange has been opened to link the suburban train network and the metro station of the same name next door. This work, portrayed as a 'modernisation' in public exhibitions, posters and leaflets issued by the State of São Paulo, was completed in late 2004.

I read the discourse here as one of heritage forgetting. From the outside the building speaks of British economic imperialism; it stands uncomfortably on its own in a skyline mixed with Portuguese colonial style churches and modernist Brazilian skyscrapers – with an architectural style that has been described as 'austere English'.²⁹ It has failed to fit in to the urban landscape and hence is not denoted as a site of railway heritage to be claimed, preserved and turned into a museum of transport. The outcome was revealed in 2005 when it was publicly dubbed the 'Estação da Luz da Nossa Língua' (Station of Light of Our Language), a 'reference centre for the Portuguese language'.³⁰ The project, costing R\$ 30 million (UK£ 6 million), was a partnership between the Federal Ministry of Culture and big businesses in Brazil including Petrobras,

TV Globo and IBM Brasil. The Brazilianisation of the train terminus was now complete with this museum of 'our' language, which opened in the balcony space above the booking hall effectively ignoring the railway heritage. The transport function of this building, meanwhile, has been modernised in recognition that it is a working station rather than an historic landscape.

Summary and conclusions

Federal State-run railway museums, like other museums in Brazil, suffer from a lack of audiences, lack of investment, lack of leadership and a lack of policy. As I have demonstrated, the National Museum Policy is only for the privileged few whilst the current academic theorizing in museums studies in Brazil is concentrated around the metropolitan centres and the larger institutions. However, there is an untapped audience that wants to share its personal memories – most specifically in a live steam environment.

This case study shows the manner in which Brazilians are engaging with transport museums. Displays in the established RFFSA/PRESERFE sites have tended to follow hierarchical narratives and reflect elite histories. Such sites have been shunned and ignored by the vast majority of the museum-visiting public. Institutionalised attitudes that discount the relevance of railway heritage mean that museums set up by the RFFSA have been starved of money, and have been faced with closure. The future for this type of museums does not look good. It has also led to São Paulo's Estação da Luz being re-imagined as a centre of the Portuguese language.

However, communities such as at Paranapiacaba do realise the potential that railway heritage may be able to deliver in terms of tourism. Here they face the bureaucratic problem of trying to develop a rail landscape without currently owning the land belonging to the RFFSA that contains a museum and winding station: key elements of the heritage. Both here and at Campinas the ABPF has discovered that there exists an appetite amongst a section of the Brazilian public for stories and representations of transport history. These are narratives bound into the paternalistic and familial nature of society that relate stories of immigration and the transportation by rail of millions of people arriving from Europe to the coffee plantations of the interior of São Paulo. These then are the private memories that are borne out of public technology in Brazil.

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Footnotes

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